

THE MINETIETH PSALM IS ONE OF MY FAVORITE ~~PASSAGES IN THE BIBLE~~. I'M USED IT BEFORE: I'VE READ IT AND THOUGHT ABOUT IT OVER AND OVER. FOR ME, THIS PSALM HAS BEEN SOMEWHAT OF A WATERSHED: EACH TIME I READ IT I FIND SOMETHING NEW--EACH TIME I FIND MY OWN THINKING PUSHED A LITTLE FURTHER AND A LITTLE DEEPER BY THESE WORDS WRITTEN CENTURIES AGO. I would venture the guess that there aren't MANY CHRISTIAN FUNERALS THAT TAKE PLACE WITHOUT ~~HAVING~~ SOME WORDS FROM THE 90TH PSALM. THE FAMOUS HYMN BY ISSAC WATTS O GOD OUR HELP IN AGES PAST HAS PERMANENTLY ENGRAVED THE PSALM IN THE TRADITION OF PROTESTANT WORSHIP. PSALM 90 IS A PROTESTANT FAVORITE: WITHIN THE PSALTER IT MUST BE PLACED AMONG THE TEN MOST IMPORTANT AND MEANINGFUL.

BUT THE REASONS IT IS A FAVORITE AND POPULAR AND THE REASONS IT IS MY FAVORITE AND FOR WHICH I HAVE CHOSEN IT AS A TEXT THIS MORNING ARE NOT ONE AND THE SAME. USUALLY MOST COMMENTARY ON THE 90TH PSALM STOPS ABRUPTLY AT THE SECOND VERSE: ("LORD, THOU HAST BEEN OUR DWELLING PLACE IN ALL GENERATIONS. BEFORE THE MOUNTAINS WERE BROUGHT FORTH, OR EVER THOU HADST FORMED THE EARTH AND THE WORLD, FROM EVERLASTING TO EVERLASTING THOU ART GOD.") A SOARING AFFIRMATION OF THE FAITH OF ISRAEL: A POETIC EXPRESSION OF GOD'S ETERNITY AND INFINITY. BUT, ALTHOUGH THE POPULARITY STOPS HERE, THE PSALM DOES NOT. IN THE VERY NEXT VERSE THE MOOD CHANGES AND THE PSALMIST ASKS SOME RATHER SERIOUS QUESTIONS OF THE GOD WHO IS FROM EVERLASTING TO EVERLASTING.

IN FACT, THE QUESTIONS ASKED BY THE PSALMIST HAVE LED O.T. SCHOLARS TO CALL THIS A COMMUNAL LAMENT. IT WAS ONE OF A NUMBER OF PSALMS USED IN THE TEMPLE BY THE COMMUNITY THE FAITHFUL WHEN TIMES GOT TOUGH. THE SPECIFIC OCCASION FOR EMPLOYING THIS PSALM COULD HAVE BEEN A MILITARY DEFEAT, OR A ~~AND~~ FAMINE, OR A DISEASE THAT CAUSED THE DEATH OF MANY ISRAELITES. IN ANY CASE THE SITUATION IS NOT A ROSY ONE AND THE PSALMIST GIVES VENT TO SOME VERY PROFOUND AND DIFFICULT QUESTIONS.

With poetic beauty the Psalmist asks ("What IS THE MEANING OF LIFE IN TERMS OF ITS BREVITY?") HIS SERIES OF METAPHORS IS BREATH TAKING. "LIFE IS LIKE DUST, THAT IS HERE ONE MOMENT AND THE NEXT IS BLOWN AWAY. ^{Post} IT SETTLES TEMPORARILY BUT THEN IS LIFTED BY A GUST OF WIND AND SWIRLS OUT OF SIGHT. LIFE IS LIKE A BLADE OF GRASS THAT IS FRESH AND NEW, GLISTENING IN THE WETNESS OF THE MORNING. BUT IN THE BLISTERING HEAT OF MIDDAY IT FADES AND DRIES AND BY EVENING IT HAS WITHERED AWAY. LIFE IS LIKE A DREAM THE FLEETING, NEBULOUS WORLD OF SLEEP THAT ELUDES US AFTER WE HAVE WAKENED. AT BEST LIFE LASTS SEVENTY OR EIGHTY YEARS: THIS BRIEF SPAN MUST BE SEEN IN LIGHT OF ETERNITY. SKILLFULLY THE PSALMISTS POINTS OUT THAT IN TERMS OF ETERNITY A THOUSAND YEARS ARE LIKE YESTERDAY WHEN IT IS PAST. IN TERMS OF THE TIMELESSNESS OF ETERNITY A THOUSAND YEARS ARE LIKE A WATCH IN THE NIGHT: THE THREE BRIEF HOURS OF SLEEP ALLOTTED A MAN WHILE WATCHING OVER A HERD OF SHEEP. A THOUSAND YEARS ARE LIKE YESTERDAY OR LIKE THE UNSIGNIFICANT HOURS OF ~~XXX~~ DARKNESS: AND AT BEST MAN CAN HOPE TO LIVE SEVENTY OR EIGHTY YEARS. THOSE WHO LIKE THEIR RELIGION SOFT AND EASY: WHO WISH TO BE COMFORTED AND LULLED BY SUNDAY PIETY, REALLY OUGHT NOT TO READ THIS PSALM. FOR HERE IS A SOBERING REFLECTION OF THE BREVITY OF LIFE --A TAUT, BLUNT QUESTION THROWN IN THE FACE OF GOD: "SINCE THIS IS TRUE: SINCE WE HAVE BEEN GIVEN SO LITTLE TIME, WHAT IS THE MEANING OF LIFE--WHAT IS ITS PURPOSE?"

Ps. 22 The psalmists' SECOND LAMENT IS EVEN MORE SERIOUS THAN THE FIRST. ("THE YEARS OF OUR LIFE ARE THREE SCORE AND TEN, OR EVEN BY REASON OF STRENGTH, FOUR SCORE: YET THEIR SPAN IS BUT TOIL AND TROUBLE.") AS IF IT ISN'T BAD ENOUGH TO LIVE ONLY 70 YEARS, IN THE LONG RUN THOSE YEARS SEEM TO PRODUCE ONLY STRIFE AND HATRED: TOIL AND TROUBLE. MAN IS GIVEN TO LIVE SO BRIEFLY AND WITH HIS PRECIOUS TIME HE IS EVIL. ("HOW LONG, O LORD? " CRIES THE PSALMIST. "WHAT CAN ALL THIS MEAN?" IS THERE ANY MEANING TO THIS SUFFERING? THESE INSIGNIFICANT SEVENTY YEARS THAT AT BEST ONLY GIVE US TOIL AND TROUBLE? THE PSALMIST IS ASKING THE AGE OLD QUESTION OF EVIL: THE QUESTION THAT HAS OCCUPIED THE MINDS OF PHILOSOPHERS AND RELIGIOUS THINKERS FROM ANCIENT TIMES TO THE PRESENT. IF THERE IS A GOOD GOD, IF CREATION IS GOOD, IF THE GOOD GOD RULES OVER HIS GOOD CREATION HOW CAN WE EXPLAIN THE PRESENCE OF EVIL IN HUMAN LIFE? FEW MEN HAVE DARED TO ASK THE QUESTION IN STARK HONESTY: THOSE WHO HAVE HAD THE COURAGE TO ASK IT HAVE

EITHER BEEN GREAT MEN OF FAITH OR GREAT OPPONENTS OF THE FAITH. AGAINST THOSE WHO WANT A RELIGION THAT HAS ANSWERS RATHER THAN QUESTIONS: A RELIGION THAT CLOSES AND SEALS THE MIND RATHER THAN EXPOSING IT TO THE RISK OF FREE THOUGHT, OUGHT NOT TO REACH THIS PSALM. FOR HERE, IN THE MIDDLE OF THE PSALTER, THE BOOK OF INSPIRING POETRY, WE HEAR a man being brutally honest -- A MAN WHO SEES EVIL IN LIFE AND WANTS TO KNOW WHY IT IS SO.

YOU KNOW HISTORY CHANGES CULTURES AND WAYS OF LIVING: TIME ALTERS MORES AND VALUES: THE YEARS DO MAKE A DIFFERENCE: BUT THE MAIN CHARACTER IN THE DRAMA OF HISTORY REMAINS PRETTY MUCH THE SAME. MAN HAS NOT CHANGED: IN OUR ENLIGHTENED DAY HE IS STILL SEARCHING FOR ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS HE WAS ASKING THREE THOUSAND YEARS AGO. THIS HAS BEEN CALLED THE AGE OF ANXIETY: AND YET I BELIEVE MAN'S ANXIETIES ARE ESSENTIAL the same in this age as they always have been. they have taken new shapes AND FORMS: WE HAVE SINGLED THEM OUT AND GIVEN THEM NAMES. BUT STILL THE ROOT OF MAN'S RESTLESSNESS AND ANXIETY IS THIS MATTER OF DEATH. THE IRONY OF DEATH STILL CATCHES US BY THE THROAT PERIODICALLY: THE INEVITABILITY OF OUR OWN DEATH STILL MAKES US WONDER AND QUESTION: DEATH STILL SEEMS TO LAUGH IN THE FACE OF ALL OUR VAUNTED AND BELOVED ACHIEVEMENTS. WE STILL ASK, WHY?

UPON HEARING OF THE QUEEN'S DEATH IN SHAKESPEARE'S GREATEST DRAMA, MCBETH HAS THE FOLLOWING TO SAY:

"TOMORROW AND TOMORROW AND TOMORROW,
CREEPS IN THIS PETTY PACE FROM DAY TO DAY
TO THE LAST SYLLABLE OF RECORDED TIME.
AND ALL OUR YESTERDAYS HAVE LIGHTED FOOLS
THE WAY TO DUSTY DEATH. OUT, OUT, BRIEF CANDLE.
LIFE'S BUT A WALKING SHADOW, A POOR PLAYER
THAT STRUTS AND FRETS HIS HOUR UPON THE STAGE
AND THEN IS HEARD NO MORE: IT IS A TALE
TOLD BY AN IDIOT, FULL OF SOUND AND FURY
SIGNIFYING NOTHING."

HERE, ANOTHER LAMENT: THIS ONE WRITTEN A FEW HUNDRED YEARS AGO: THIS ONE, HOWEVER, HAS AN ANSWER. WITH THE PSALMIST, SHAKESPEARE LAMENT LIFE'S BREVITY, LIFE'S ^A WALKING SHADOW, LIKE A PATHETIC ACTOR DOING HIS SHORT PART ON THE STAGE OF HISTORY. BUT SHAKESPEARE HAS AN ANSWER TOO -- ("LIFE'S A TALE TOLD BY AN IDIOT, FULL OF SOUND AND FURY, SIGNIFYING NOTHING.") THERE CAN BE NO QUESTION WHERE HE STANDS--LIFE SIGNIFIES NOTHING--THERE IS NO MEANING OR PURPOSE TO BE FOUND. IN OUR DAY MANY HAVE TAKEN UP THIS GOSPEL OF DESPAIR. THE PHILOSOPHY OF NIHILISM OR NOTHINGNESS IS VERY MUCH IN VOGUE: TO BE "IN" ONE OUGHT TO BE A DEVOTEE OF ALBERT CAMUS AND FRANZ KAFKA WHO CYNICALLY INTERPRETED LIFE AS SHALLOW, MEANINGLESSNESS.

GRANTED NOT MANY PEOPLE READ CAMUS AND KAFKA, ^{unfortunately not many read} ~~UNFORTUNATELY NOT MANY READ~~ SHAKESPEARE ^{to that matter} ~~AND~~ THE BIBLE EITHER. BUT EVERYONE OF US--READER~~s~~ OR NON READER~~s~~: THINKER~~s~~ OR NON THINKER~~s~~ HAS SOME ANSWER TO THE QUESTION POSED BY DEATH. THERE IS A DELIGHTFUL GERMAN WORD THAT CAN'T BE TRANSLATED ACCURATELY INTO ENGLISH: ^(Weltanschauung) ~~WELTANSCHAUUNG~~ ROUGHLY WORLD-VIEW OR OUTLOOK ON LIFE. WE ALL HAVE A ^{weltanschauung} ~~WELTANSCHAUUNG~~: WE ALL LOOK AT LIFE IN A CERTAIN WAY THAT IS PART OF US: AND THAT WAY OF LOOKING AT LIFE REFLECTS OUR ANSWER TO THE QUESTION OF THE PSALMIST.

IN THESE TERMS IT WOULD SEEM THAT MOST OF US WOULD ACCEPT SHAKESPEARE'S VERDICT; FOR° DON'T WE LIVE AND ACT AS IF LIFE SIGNIFIES NOTHING? DON'T WE ^{THROW} ~~PIDDLE~~ THE TIME ALLOTTED TO US AWAY ON TRIVIA: DON'T WE LIVE DAY BY DAY NEVER GIVING A THOUGHT TO THE MEANING OF OUR LIVES? WHEN WE MUST CONFRONT DEATH--DON'T WE SHUDDER AND GIVE VENT TO FEARS THAT IN TURN PROVE THAT FOR US THERE IS NO REAL MEANING TO LIFE: THAT WE STILL ARE GROPPING FOR THE ANSWERS TO THE QUESTIONS ASKED BY THE PSALMIST. ^{still anxious}

THE QUESTION OF EVIL HAS NEVER LESSENED IN PROFUNDITY EITHER. AT VARIOUS TIMES IN THE HISTORY OF THOUGHT MEN HAVE BEEN OUT AND OUT OPTIMISTS. THERE HAVE BEEN TIMES when men denied the existence of evil in life and in man. ^{and I suppose} THERE ARE STILL THOSE WHO REFUSE TO ADMIT THE REALITY OF EVIL. TODAY, HOWEVER, THERE SEEMS TO BE NO EXCUSE FOR NOT SEEING EVIL. MODERN MEDIA OF MASS COMMUNICATION ALLOW US TO BE EYE WITNESSES TO TRAGEDY AND WAR AND DEATH AND INJUSTICE. ONE CAN HARDLY READ THE FRONT PAGE OF A NEWSPAPER AND FEEL THAT LIFE IS A BED OF ROSES. TO THE CONTRARY THE QUESTION OF EVIL STILL BURNS IN OUR THROATS AND STILL WE ASK IT. IN OUR DAY THE CUMULATIVE EVIL

of the generations seems to have come to its zenith in man's NEWLY DISCOVERED POWER OF OBLITERATION. | UNDER THE SHADOW OF A MUSHROOM CLOUD WE STILL ASK, "HOW LONG O LORD?" | WHAT MEANING AND PURPOSE CAN THERE BE IF THIS IS WHAT WE HAVE DONE?

WE HAVE SEEN THEN THAT THIS PSALM DOES NOT OFFER EASY ANSWERS TO LIFE'S QUESTIONS. IT ASKS THE SAME QUESTIONS THAT MEN HAVE ALWAYS ASKED BUT IT IS NOT GUILTY OF GIVING A SUPERFICIAL, STOCK ANSWER. | RATHER IT IS SATISFIED ONLY TO ASK—LEAVING OPEN THE POSSIBILITY THAT THERE ARE NO ANSWERS. | THIS IS THE PERFECT EXAMPLE OF INTEGRITY AND COURAGE. | THE PSALMIST HAS THE INTEGRITY TO CALL A SPADE A SPADE, AND THE COURAGE TO ASK QUESTIONS, TO WHICH THERE MAY BE NO ANSWER. | NOT MANY OF US CAN SAY THE SAME.

ANALYSES OF OUR CULTURE FOR SOME TIME NOW, HAVE BEMOANED THE LACK OF INTEGRITY. BEGINNING WITH SINCLAIR LEWIS, NOVELISTS, WHO ARE BY NATURE THE PULSE BEAT OF A CULTURE, HAVE LAMPOONED AND SATIRIZED THE HYPOCRISY AND DISHONESTY OF MODERN MAN. LEWIS'S, BABBIT, IS PROBABLY THE BIGGEST HYPOCRIT IN MODERN LITERATURE, JUST EDGING OUT ELMER GANTY. | THE WHOLE SCHOOL OF THOUGHT THAT GREW OUT OF THE SUBURBAN MOVEMENT—THE MAN IN THE GREY FLANNEL SUIT, THE ORGANIZATION MAN, WHITE COLLAR, THE STATUS SEEKERS ALL POINT TO MODERN MAN'S GLARING ~~SELF~~ SUPERFICIALITY, HIS OUTRIGHT ^{refusal} DENIAL TO BE HONEST ABOUT LIFE. | THESE NOVELISTS, AND SURVEYORS OF OUR LIFE ARE HITTING THE NAIL ON THE HEAD FOR MOST OF US DON'T LIVE IN DEPTH: MOST OF US DON'T ALLOW THE SERIOUS AND PROFOUND QUESTIONS TO ENTER OUR MINDS. | INSTEAD WE LIVE IN A STATE OF ANESTHESIA, OUR QUESTIONS DULLED BY OUR OCCUPATION IN OTHER MORE IMPORTANT MATTERS.

THE PSALMIST HAD INTEGRITY: BUT HAVING RAISED A SERIOUS QUESTION HE DID NOT BACK AWAY FROM IT: RATHER THAN ACCEPT A SLIPSHOD ANSWER HE WAS WILLING TO LEAVE HIS QUESTIONS UNANSWERED. | HOW MANY OF US HAVE THIS COURAGE? DON'T WE RATHER WANT AND DEMAND ANSWERS. | DOESN'T THE GREATEST PART OF OUR POPULATION WANT SIMPLE ANSWERS TO THE QUESTIONS OF LIFE AND DEATH, GOOD AND EVIL. | DON'T PEOPLE NATURALLY GRAVITATE TOWARDS A RELIGION THAT PROVIDES EASY ANSWERS, A SORT OF PREFABRICATED SECURITY THAT TELLS THEM IF THEY LIVE RIGHT AND OBEY THE RULES THEY'LL GO TO HEAVEN?

*Right wing
fundamentalism*

Not the soaring affirmation, but

THE BEAUTY OF THE 90TH PSALM IS THE COURAGE OF THE PSALMIST IN NOT YIELDING TO THE TEMPTATION TO ANSWER HIS OWN QUESTIONS. THE IMPORTANCE IT HAS FOR US IS THAT it invites us to be perfectly honest with ourselves--AND WITH GOD. IT INVITES US, IN THE PRESENCE OF GOD, TO USE OUR MINDS TO THE FULLEST, QUESTIONING AND DOUBTING NEVER HESITATING OR WITHDRAWING. IF WE COULD LEARN ~~THIS~~ THIS ABSOLUTE HONESTY, WE, OUR FAMILIES, OUR CHURCH, OUR COMMUNITY AND OUR NATION, WOULD BE MUCH THE BETTER.

THIS BRINGS ME TO A FINAL OBSERVATION ABOUT THE PSALM. THE PSALM IS BRUTALLY HONEST IT DRAGS US FACE TO FACE WITH THE UNPLEASANT FACTS OF LIFE AND DEATH: IT INVITES US TO EMERGE OURSELVES IN THE SEARCH FOR MEANING AND PURPOSE: IT INVITES US TO DEPAIR AND LAMENT BUT IT DOES NOT DO THIS IN A VACUUM. REMEMBER THAT THE PSALM BEGINS NOT WITH THE QUESTIONS BUT WITH ~~A SOARING~~ ^{the} AFFIRMATION ("LORD, THOU HAST BEEN OUR DWELLING PLACE IN ALL GENERATIONS.") THE PSALMIST BEGINS WITH AN UNSHAKABLE FAITH IN THE GOD WHO IS FROM EVERLASTING TO EVERLASTING. THIS SAYS A LOT ABOUT OUR RELIGION, OUR RELIGIOUS FAITH AND PRACTICE. IT SAYS A LOT TO A RELIGION THAT IDENTIFIES DOUBT AND QUESTION WITH HERESY. IT SPEAKS RATHER SHARPLY TO US WHEN WE EXPECT OUR RELIGION TO PROVIDE US WITH PAT ANSWERS. IT DRAWS US BACK WHEN WE FEEL THAT BEING A CHRISTIAN MEANS HAVING ANSWERS TO EVERY QUESTION LIFE MIGHT PROMPT.

IT, IN FACT, PINPOINTS THE TRUE SEARCHER: THE TRUE DOUBTER AS THE MAN OF TRUE FAITH IT TELLS US THAT THE PERSON WHO CLOSSES HIS MIND TO THE QUESTIONS OF LIFE AND DEATH IN THE NAME OF FAITH, IS ACTUALLY DENYING THE STRENGTH OF THAT FAITH. SUCH A PERSON IS REALLY SAYING ("PLEASE, DON'T MAKE ME THINK, MY FAITH WILL NOT SURVIVE IT.") TRUE FAITH, ON THE OTHER HAND IS PERFECTLY COMPATIBLE WITH SOUND QUESTIONING AND DOUBTING. ^{True faith precedes doubt.} TRUE FAITH ALLOWS THE BELIEVER TO OBSERVE THE PARADOXES OF LIFE--AND OUTLIVES DOUBT.

THIS IS THE ULTIMATE MESSAGE OF THE PSALM AS WE READ IT TODAY. IT IS A CHALLENGE TO BE A DOUBTER, TO BE HONEST, IT IS ~~THEN~~ AN INVITATION TO DO THIS WITH COURAGEOUS FAITH: IN THE KNOWLEDGE THAT ("THOU HAST BEEN OUR DWELLING PLACE IN ALL GENERATIONS BEFORE EVEN THE MOUNTAINS WERE BROUGHT FORTH FROM EVERLASTING TO EVERLASTIN THOU ART GOD.")

Sept 1

O Almighty God, Lord and Father of our Savior^{Jesus} Christ, Creator and Sustainer of All men, humbly we come before thee. In the quiet of this hour speak to us of eternal things O Lord, open our hearts to the presence of the Spirit; open our minds to thy mysteries. Give us, O Lord, the eyes & ears of Faith; that searching for thee we might find thee - that having found thee we might allow thee to find us. Hear our prayers O Lord; grant us wisdom & courage that we might pray truthfully and boldly: - that in thy Fatherly love we might gain the full confidence of Faith.

O thou who art high above the heavens, and yet present in the simple and the everyday; we bring before thee our prayers & thanksgiving. On this day our Father we thank thee for minds and bodies; that allow us to take the elements of thy creation, and build from them a civilization of comfort. We thank thee for the ability to work and labor: - we thank thee for those who have built civilization with toil and hard work; and for those who today labor in its industries and factories.

We thank thee O God that thou hast called us to labor and work in thy Kingdom also: that amidst the temporal things of life we have been called to perform the eternal and the infinite. We thank thee for thy church everywhere! - for this church - for the task thou hast set before us.

O Lord we pray on behalf of our Fellowmen everywhere. Give us grace that we may see the needs of others; that the cares & concerns of our brothers may become ~~to~~ ours. We earnestly pray for those of our nation who suffer prejudice, hatred & injustice. We pray for those who have followed their conscience & taken their stand. And O Lord we pray for those who are the victims of their own hatred; who have isolated themselves by hating their Fellowmen. Give them thy grace that they may see beyond color and pigmentation - to the heart and soul of every man - created in thy image.

We pray O Lord, for thy strength & guidance: lead us as we attempt to serve thee: show us the work that must be done: - give us, the courage of Faith. - All this we pray in the name of thy Son Jesus Christ Amen